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Strategic ambiguity: a roundtable on cultural economy and consumer culture

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ABSTRACT

This lightly edited transcript records the discussion at the opening roundtable of the What Was Cultural Economy? symposium at City, University of London in January 2020. In it, Don Slater, Sean Nixon and Liz McFall, all participants in the original 'Workshop on Cultural Economy' reflect on the conceptual and institutional history of 'cultural economy' and how it intersected with their shared interests in advertising and consumer culture. Their individual reflections are followed by a shared discussion, with contributions from the floor. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

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Editors' note: This roundtable discussion forms part of the special issue *What Was Cultural Economy?* The issue has its origins in a January 2020 symposium, held at City, University of London, marking two decades since Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke convened a 'Workshop on Cultural Economy' at the Open University in Milton Keynes, an event that culminated in the publication of the 2002 edited collection (Pryke and du Gay 2002). What was cultural economy? collects responses to these founding moments in the field from a number of key figures, who each reflect on the relationship between conceptual clarification and their own academic histories. Here we present a transcript of the opening roundtable in which three participants from the original workshop, Don Slater, Sean Nixon and Liz McFall, discussed how their shared interests in advertising and consumer culture and intersected with the institutional history of cultural economy and the founding of the Journal. Their individual reflections are followed by a shared discussion with contributions from the floor. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Don Slater

I have to start by saying that the only reason I'm on first is because there was lots of email backchat yesterday morning in which we all tried to stand at the back of the class and not be discovered. I put my head up, so I'm first. That is to say, this is not to privilege any one particular take on what happened with cultural economy, either twenty years ago or in the intervening years. In fact, I'm probably most inappropriate as a starting speaker because I don't think I have used the term 'cultural economy' myself. I looked back through a number of publications and the term is not there. Which doesn't mean that the original event wasn't enormously exciting or that I haven't been a fairly consistent fellow traveller. It's simply a reflection on the term itself, 'cultural economy'. I

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think I saw it then, and I probably see it still, as one of that privileged class of concepts which I think of in terms of strategic ambiguity: a kind of boundary object that's passed around between different disciplines and different intellectual projects, in which we all can use the term very happily, and communicate very well with it, and yet we all mean different things by it. At certain moments we examine that ambiguity, and the differences in our use of the term, and interesting conversations and disputes start up – which is good for us! And there are other times when we just go with the flow and there's a dense enough web of family resemblances and overlapping concerns that we all share which allow extremely interesting, enlightening and creative spaces to be constructed.

If I think back either on the original motivations that got us into a room to talk that day or on what keeps that conversation going, a lot of it is fairly negative: simply, an absolutely rock solid and almost visceral opposition to economic abstraction. That's what it all came down to. Cultural economy was not just some particular formulation of the cultural but also a *resistance* to the dominance, both politically and intellectually, of economics. That framed my own encounter with what was going on. Crucially, that model of economics – which is still in power, particularly with the ongoing march of neoliberalism – promotes economics as modelling, as measurement, as quantification, and as categories that present themselves as universal rather than culturally or ethnographically embedded in particular ways of life and in particular political and social projects. So the impetus for *cultural* economy was to ask: what are the different places one can stand in order to actually give the world flesh and blood again? To give it the kind of coherence that matched the ways in which we actually carry out everyday life, which includes culture, economy and politics. I should say, in brackets, that it's that kind of consideration which has meant that, throughout my career, I've always ended up as a sociologist, rather than either an economist or a cultural studies scholar. It's those strategically ambiguous spaces in which you can keep it all together.

So the aim was to start social analysis from somewhere other than abstraction. And we all started from different places. My particular place at the time was consumption and consumer culture. A reason for choosing to work on consumption and consumer culture in the first place also came back to the disease of economic abstraction. That's to say: we were faced constantly with a false choice – which ran from early modernity to the present-day – between either individual preferences, latterly inscribed in 'rational choice theory', on one hand, or political economy, which was really about domination by capital. Those two different kinds of abstraction seemed to erase all the space in-between, in which we actually lived our lives: through objects, materials, exchange and so forth. So 'cultural economy' was a good phrase to assert that the commodities in your local supermarket could be thought as something other than either indexes of revealed individual preferences or ideological codes.

My contribution to the book was an article based on a chapter from my doctoral thesis from twenty years earlier, which I had just never gotten around to writing up for publication. The thesis was an ethnography of advertising, and was structured by an effort to evade the false choice – dominant for many years – between either political economy or semiotics. You couldn't think of a clearer divide between economic abstraction (in Marxist formalism) and the spinning-off of representation and culture as an absolutely disembodied thing, with ideological and signifying codes as their own autonomous social 'moment'. Either we did textual analyses of advertisements or we went further and further into the capitalist smog that was developing ever more brutally around us with the domination of marketing and advertising from the 1980s onwards. How do you overcome that split? How do you think, from the point of view of a marketing or an advertising person, about a market? Simple as that. For them, advertising was not a semiotic code to be manipulated in a kind of Baudrillardian sense (Baudrillard 1996). And it wasn't a way of carrying out ideological warfare in a kind of Althusserian, or Judith Williamson sense (Williamson 1978). A market was an anthropological category. If you're marketing to the toothpaste market or the automobile market, you have to think about what the hell a car is, or what a toothpaste is. And you need to think how these entities link *both* into relations of competition with other car and toothpaste manufacturers *and* also into relations of consumption: everyday material culture, in the form of how people brush their teeth

and carry out oral hygiene, or drive about their cities. If you are actually intervening in markets and trying to come up with an instrumental strategy for profiting in them, you have to link economic and cultural categories into defined entities – product concepts or definitions that are both market positions and cultural positions. You have to remake both anthropological and economic categories, at the same time. And that's what marketing and advertising people do – they do 'cultural economy'!

I'll just conclude by saying there were three issues that emerged from nearly the start of this conversation about cultural economy, and they are worth pointing out again. First, it's not rocket science but 'cultural economy' was a strategically ambiguous slogan in terms of what it actually referred to: were we talking about a shift in *economics*, or in the *economy*? That's to say, was 'cultural economy' a critique of economics, or indeed of cultural studies, as intellectual traditions of abstraction; or was it a claim (which were legion then and since) about the enculturation of the economy and the ways in which we were moving into a world whose logic was increasingly provided by cultural and creative industries? At the time, I wasn't personally interested in creative industries *at all*. I was interested in remaking economic categories in ways that were recognisably human, social and political. So the issue was, again, economic abstraction. Whether it was in creative or cultural industries or whether it was in the automotive industry really was, for me, not the point. So there's a question right from the start about what we mean by cultural economy. Are we living in an economy that is more cultural, in some sense? Or are we living in a world that cultural and economic abstraction can't make sense of – but in fact never could?

The second point arose not at the conference but I feel a bit personally responsible for something that happened after. Once you actually think about cultural economy, in whatever sense you're using the term, how does this impact our view of the economic actor, of forms of calculation, forms of instrumental action in the world? This came up most strongly in all those debates, where so much blood was spilled – and I won't spill any more today – about Michel Callon's remark that '*homo economicus* really does exist' (Callon 1998, p. 51, cf. Barry and Slater 2005). That's to say: to what extent are we dealing with realised forms of alienation and abstraction and to what extent is it always a mistake to start analysis from the assumption that economic abstractions are ever successfully *performed*? And is it not dangerous to either subsume aesthetic and cultural calculation within economic rationality or to treat it as a special and separable logic?

The final point I would make also didn't come out in the conference but did come out in a lot of subsequent work. Once you're thinking about cultural economy, what does an academic intervention in the real world start to look like? It's no longer simply a dialogue with economists or cultural studies. It's a much broader front, and also a much more creative front, in which one can imagine a far wider sphere of political action than one could under previous disciplinary divides.

Sean Nixon

There were different routes into 'cultural economy', different trajectories, and different pathways through it. Mine was via a sociologically-inflected cultural studies. I was riveted in the late 1980s with the shifting forms of youth style and its intersection with new ethnic, gender and sexual identities. In seeking to explore this phenomenon, particularly the way popular culture appeared to be picking up on progressive social change, I wanted to challenge what were then two dominant tendencies within cultural studies.

The first was the focus on cultures of consumption coming out of subcultural studies. Although my research was informed by *Resistance Through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1976) and particularly Dick Hebdige's *Subculture* (Hebdige 1979) – I saw what I was doing as extending Hebdige's analysis of style from subculture to the style press, advertising and retail displays – it was motivated by a desire to bend the stick of analysis within cultural studies away from the creative youth stylists (the consumers) and towards the worlds of production and circulation; from the 'street' to the High Street, glossy adverts and magazine spreads. My focus became the shaping of popular

identities from above, rather than resistance from below: it was Gramscian in its interest in the way the consumer industries sought to pick up on and appropriate elements within not only the felt movements of culture, but from more marginalised forms of commercial practice – like the fledgling style press.

To this end, I wanted to hold onto an interest in visual culture, style and representation derived from subcultural theory and Barthes' semiotics, but more fully integrated with an attention to the commercial institutions and organisations involved in the production and circulation of popular cultural forms. My research, then, set out to investigate not just 'texts' but 'institutions' – and in this regard my encounter with Foucault's work was transformative, allowing me to explore a regime of representation generated across a range of sites and spaces of representation and underpinned by forms of expert knowledge and institutional practices. Without developing it much further here, it is worth saying that the focus on spectatorship that was central to my research and the subsequent book *Hard Looks* (Nixon 1996) – particularly the concern to grasp the formation of ways of looking from magazine spread to TV advert to shop display – is unthinkable without my engagement with Foucault.

Foucault's work was also key to the second major strand in the research and the second break with established forms of cultural studies. This centred upon the question of determination. Like many other people within British cultural studies at this time, my reading of Foucault was filtered through Althusserian and Gramscian preoccupations. It is worth remembering that cultural studies in the UK at this time, the late 1980s, was Marxist in its broad intellectual architecture. The 'culture and society' relationship was seen through the lens of Marx's base/superstructure metaphor, albeit a lens cut anew by the influence of Althusser and Gramsci. Althusser's idea of the 'relative autonomy' of the ideological level of society (Althusser 1971) allowed cultural studies to give proper weight to the role of cultural representation in shaping meanings and identities, whilst still holding onto to the notion – famously or infamously – that the economic level would determine the shape of the ideological (and political) superstructure in the last instance.

If this Althusserian position was productive for cultural studies of forms like advertising – notably in Janice Winship (1980) and Judith Williamson's (1978) work – key thinkers like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams were already, in the early to mid-1980s, seeking to reflect further on the problem with the base/superstructure metaphor and the idea of 'determination'. Hall certainly begin to talk about the economic determining cultural forms not in the last instance, but in the first instance – through the way in which economic resources made possible certain kinds of representation (Hall 1986). Williams also wrestled with the mechanical implications of 'determination', preferring to talk instead about 'limitation' and the 'exerting of pressures' (Williams 1973). Foucault's work entered cultural studies through this problematic, appropriated in part to rethink the relations between different kinds of social practices, including the links between culture and economy. If Foucault was generally agnostic about the relationship between discourses and 'extra-discursive practices', his thinking opened up an interest, for example, in the productive power of economic discourses in shaping how objects like a national economy were made visible and knowable. In doing so, his ideas begun to shatter the established (post-Althusserian) relations of determination between economic and cultural practices within cultural studies.

My work sought to deploy a flatter ontology that broke with the hierarchy of social practices derived from Althusserian Marxism and instead talked about the imbricated and interdependent nature of economic and cultural practices within the sphere of commercial cultural production. This conceptual shift allowed me to attend to the role of cultural practices – cultural representations – in the formation and operation of the markets associated with the 'new man'. To put it extremely succinctly, I argued that new markets for specific kinds of male consumers – the 'new man' – had to be imagined, represented and elaborated through cultural work and that this cultural work – evident, for example, in the routines of market research as much as in style imagery – were key to the establishment and performance of the commercial relations between clients, intermediaries and

consumers. The representation of the style-conscious young man was a necessary part of the constitution of these economic or commercial relations – it was part of their conditions of existence.

In this regard, I argued that the relations between culture and economy were not best conceptualised as the effects of a primary, foundational set of practices – the economic – upon another 'relatively autonomous' domain – the cultural. Rather, if all identities and practices, including cultural and economic ones, were contingent, the aim of cultural analysis was to detail and document the relations between these incompletely formed identities and practices – to think about their imbrication and mutual constitution. My approach to what later became called 'cultural economy', then, was to challenge both a narrowly or purely cultural readings of popular culture in which economic practices only ghosted across the analytic scene as shadowy but ominous constraints or blocks to the play of language and representation. And – at the same time – to contest the idea of the primary and foundational nature of economic life and the persistence of the economy, as Laclau put it, as the last redoubt of essentialism (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). So my contribution to the cultural economy workshop was coloured by this focus and these preoccupations.

Liz Mcfall[1]

I kind of want to talk backwards. I've been given the credit for being the Editor-in-Chief already a couple of times this morning and I'm not actually the Editor-in-Chief, certainly not solo. It's a job I share currently with Carolyn Hardin of Miami University, Ohio, who's an excellent Editor-in-Chief, and previously with Taylor Nelms from Irvine. I want to mention that because it bears on what we're talking about. In my role in the journal, I've done a fair bit of production editing – but in the last five years, at least, I've done far more of something else, which is treating the *Journal of Cultural Economy* as a market experiment, as a live test of some of the things that we were debating about, in terms of that drift between the tradition that we were all speaking to when the Cultural Economy workshop started, from Meaghan Morris, through Don Slater's work, through Sean Nixon's work.

Cultural economy, as everyone's said this morning, means different things to different people. It does make me feel slightly uncomfortable in terms of the narcissism of minor differences but the 'cultural economy' that I know best is the tradition that comes out of the Open University, through the Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change (CRESC) between the OU and Manchester, and how that brought the *Journal of Cultural Economy* into existence. And at the start of that process of making the *Journal of Cultural Economy*, which began by 2005, I was really precious about what 'cultural economy' *should* mean. I definitely didn't want it to have that tight association with the creative industries. Similar to my friends here, I had that kind of socio-cultural economy background, I wanted to use the term to think about the relations between culture and economy, what they meant, and how they might be theorised and described. I'm a lot less precious about that now. I realised a few years into the *JCE*'s existence that it wasn't my job to describe, define or pin down what cultural economy meant. It was the job of the community of people who were building it. The term has been taken up in lots of ways – in the content that gets published, by the editorial board and the quite large collective of editors that we now have – and that's a really good thing. We've always thought 'cultural economy' is a slightly odd and uncomfortable phrase. But it somehow seems to work.

This version of cultural economy came out of the work of people like John Allen, Paul du Gay, Michael Pryke, Sean Nixon, Don Slater, Angela McRobbie, Meaghan Morris, who in different ways were concerned with the question of whether cultural studies had done enough to understand the economy. I followed in their wake, not by that many years but by a little bit. At the time of the Workshop I was getting towards the end of my PhD, which like Sean and Don's early research was on advertising. Michel Callon's (1998) *The Laws of the Markets* had just been published and I was trying to make sense of it. I was coming out of a Foucauldian tradition and I was trying to think through, 'well, what's this book saying that Foucault can't tell me about advertising practice?'

For one reason or another, I had ended up doing a historical PhD based around trying to find out, historically, what I could about how advertising was practiced, how its institutions worked. And what hit me, most strongly, was that some of the things that were informing the cultural economy project – the two main ideas, for me anyway – were that there were substantive and epistemological changes at work that challenged the way we understood the differences and the relationship between 'culture' and 'economy'. Both Sean and Don have alluded to some of those epistemological changes and some of the substantive changes. I remember from Sean's chapter in the book that came before the workshop, which was part of the Open University's *Culture, Media and Identities* – incidentally the last course that Stuart Hall chaired at the university – about the aestheticization of everyday life (Du Gay 1997). About how you couldn't even look at a Royal Mail stamp without seeing the work of branding, imagination. So nothing that was dull was allowed to be dull any more in the market. Lash and Urry (1994), at the same time, were talking about the increased velocity of signs and space.

But in my historical archival work – which was based in a barn in Norfolk somewhere, basically a dumpster for advertising records, where I used to bump into Sean occasionally; both of us digging around for any records we could find about how advertising was done in the early twentieth century – I couldn't find a time in the past where advertising was done in a straightforwardly informational, straightforwardly rational, straightforwardly communicative way. What I found was a constant interplay between symbolic representation and economic calculation. I also found, digging even further back, a description of advertising – before advertising had a settled word – which described it as a 'quaint device'. This was exactly the time when I was trying to make sense of the notion of 'socio-technical calculative devices'. And from then onward I played with this idea of devices. I've continued to play with it ever since: what do we understand by a device? And actually, Don *has* used the term 'cultural economy', with Joanne Entwistle, in 'Reassembling the cultural' (Entwistle and Slater 2014) – one of my favourite *JCE* articles because it goes precisely to the moment that I was kind of wrestling with all through that time. I absolutely bought the argument that cultural studies and sociology had not paid enough attention to sociotechnical action and the economy. I was absolutely there. But I also never quite left behind an interest in, for want of a better word or description, symbolic representation, or 'culture'. The horrible, difficult, troubling, nothing-word of 'culture'.

'The middle of everywhere' is how we describe the JCE's location on Twitter, which is where I think it should be. It *should* be in the middle of debates for people who are trying to understand socio-technical political relationships but also how all that stuff that's really hard to describe – the things that basically fit in the bucket called culture but the things that you can't get your hands on, about meaning, about affective relationships, about why we love one brand and not another, about why we vote for Brexit and don't – all that kind of *atmosphere*, *sensibility*, *sentiment* that goes on, that we don't have the words to describe. That continues to be what interests me most. I currently would describe that as being concerned with 'the orchestration of technique and sentiment'. It is not enough to understand the technical, organisational, institutional arrangements underpinning a particular phenomenon. What *really* matters is to understand what it takes on top of that, to pull people along with you, to change hearts and minds, to get engagement, buy-in, whatever you want to call it.

I think that matters even more as we now face the twenties, particularly since we are in a world dominated by tech industries, debates about surveillance, privatisation, about how our selves are given over more and more to Big Tech. I'm going to namecheck Shoshanna Zuboff's big book (Zuboff 2019), because it was on Obama's favourites list last year – this might be slightly controversial but I want to push against it, because I don't think we know in advance where we're going. I don't think it's a done deal that the future is going to be dominated – our souls, our everyday lives, our bodily movements, you name it, being 'extracted'. And I think that *does* go back to the beginnings of the Cultural Studies project, right back to Hebdige: we shouldn't give up on the possibility that things can end up differently. We need to hold on to the sense of contingency and we need to hold on to the sense of personal responsibility. If we use these devices, if we wear Apple

Watches and all the rest of it, we need to understand why we do that rather than just say 'well, it was done to us'.

Discussion

[PR: Philip Roscoe; SN: Sean Nixon; DS; Don Slater; LM: Liz McFall; JE: Joanne Entwistle; JSM: Jennifer Smith Maguire]

PR: I started my PhD in 2004 and I wanted to understand why investors put their money into small companies. So I went to a business school in Lancaster and I thought 'this is probably a marketing thing'. I read a lot of marketing and I had this idea that I could tell the story of investment as a set of consumption practices. I thought this might be about excitement and risk, gambling, masculinity and whatever, as the adverts made clear. But when I talked to these investors, they pushed back very hard against this kind of representation and instead they talked for hours about specialist technical knowledge, their programmes and their calculations, how they did things. I'm really glad that Liz mentioned this notion of the socio-technical calculative device because this seemed to me to be a methodology that captured how there *was* this sense of abstraction, purification and what have you, and that we *did* encounter these economic agents as sort of entities in their own right, if we went and talked to them. I wonder if that sort of realisation reflects the experience of the panel in that period?

SN: I mean, I do remember – this is anecdotal – I remember being in Stuart Hall's front lounge, with Liz, reading *Laws of the Markets*. And Stuart saying, about Michel Callon's notion that economic man *is* a real thing, 'made up', socio-technically constituted, 'well, when you buy a house it *is* about trying to get the best price, you are a calculative agent, you're not sentimental, you are made up as a rational, profit-maximizing being'. I think that was very, very productive, that moment of Callon's work. Callon's, Fabian Muniesa's and others, produced a much more rigorous kind of language for thinking about those socio-technical aspects of markets. I mean, with Foucault you're scrabbling around a bit to put it together whereas I think it's much more fully articulated in that ANT position.

DS: I think you can summarise some of what you're saying through a term that I'm surprised none of us have used yet this morning, 'performativity', which even Foucault doesn't give us. That's to say cultural economy was not about relating something called the cultural to something called the economic, as two hermetically-sealed entities, and then putting them together. What we were actually recovering through Callon at the time was a history of how economies and cultures came to be separated and then treated as things that had to be connected. So in many ways it's a continuation of Latour's 'we have never been modern' kind of argument. We're all dealing with a legacy of a purification, where economy and culture were separated out, and Callon was basically saying you've got to actually start from the processes of purification themselves. So all that stuff about 'externalities' is about how things come to be seen as within or outside of an economy. The problem was when, later in his work, that was seen to be a done deal. We actually lost a sense of historicity, the idea that economic man was actually accomplished. That seemed to pull the rug right out from under what we'd actually gained from him.

LM: I was just going to say that one of the things I remember from my PhD was being told that sociologists don't solve puzzles, they get bored with them and move on. I think that's increasingly been the case with me that I'm not particularly drawn to nailing down, theoretically, what it means to understand the relationship between those two words. I do agree with what Don's said that there's a kind of intellectual separating game where you establish a set of differences between what you call an instrumental world of the economy and a symbolic world of culture. These are distinctions we make and finding the best theories to understand how that's happening – it ran out of steam for me.

DS: I might have expressed that badly. This is not something that you can solve theoretically anyway. It's what pointed us to historical and ethnographic work. Again, I think one of the things that we all gained, at the time, from ANT was a sense that it wasn't a theory, it was a methodology. And that's something I really held to, myself, and it helped in thinking through these kinds of issues enormously. The question of 'what is culture, what is economy' is not a question I can answer as an analyst. It's something I have to go out and research in order to find out how it's emerging. And if I have an opinion, at the end of the day, as to 'what is culture, what is economy', I'm simply one voice in an ongoing dialogue with a whole bunch of people. And again, that's a subject of study. That's not something which we can legislate.

SN: I wrote a piece in the journal which is about market research (Nixon 2009). It's very influenced by Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller's essay (Miller and Rose 1997) and also Callon. But in the end, the *problem* of the consumer for market research – I suppose I came back to a more 'humanist' position – informed by the critique of humanism but retaining some notion of qualified universalism – where

there is a thicker human subjectivity there which things are acting upon. But I think in the ANT/post-Foucauldian tradition, it's a very, very thin subject on which things can act. And it ends up with a view of, for example, digital technology where there's no agency. You just have things done to you, as if there's no human matter that might not be completely manipulable, that may push back in some way, however you want to theorise that. So I always feel like I'm more interested in psychoanalysis and there being much more human material there upon which things are acting. We are not just the effects of these devices. Because I always think: how do you deal with Facebook or Twitter? Ultimately, there's no resistance. It just happens.

DS: This was sort of my feeling about the '*homo economicus* does exist' slogan. The subject became so thin, it actually became unconvincing. But it also became unhistorical or atemporal. Subjects no longer had a biography. They simply were the result of the immediate apparatus of a market or the devices there at that moment. Whereas I know I enter into a market with a long history of all kinds of experiences and understandings and so on, which is part of what makes me both an economic and a cultural actor. All of that seemed to get lost in Callon, I think.

JE: It's great hearing the contextualising you've all done. Where does somebody like Bourdieu sit within all this? I would agree with the emptiness of the human subject in Callon and the loss of some kind of human matter. You can talk about mediation, you can talk about *devices* mediating, but you can't get round the fact that you've got taste – and devices don't have taste. Human actors have taste structures, they're located in markets. When talking about mediation, I talk about cultural *inter*-mediaries and Bourdieu's also on this border between culture and economy. He's always been dealing with culture and the economic, prior to all this terminology. So where would you locate Bourdieu, the uses of Bourdieu, in relation to these debates?

PR: Donald MacKenzie's recently woken up to Bourdieu, ironically enough – he says we need a mundane political economy in here and we might start thinking about Bourdieu (e.g. MacKenzie 2019). Which seems to me the strangest of things, knowing where Donald has come from. But if we're talking about ideas in their intellectual context, there are huge difficulties in doing that – precisely because these are factional groups who hated each other, as far as I can tell! Is that fair?

DS: One response is simply: which Bourdieu are we talking about? The one that was in my head at that time, and probably still is, is the more anthropological Bourdieu. It's the Berber house (Bourdieu 1970). Where, again, culture is not an externality. It's not a rather mechanistic political economy. It's not a field competition involving another version of the rational actor. It's a fully *embedded* cultural actor. In that sense, for me, Bourdieu was always absolutely dead central for a whole strand of material culture studies, where again it's about the integrity of different moments within everyday practice, rather than trying to relate external social moments, like economy and culture. If you get onto later Bourdieu, it's a very different story: it's all field competition for forms of capital, which can formulaically turn into a simple extension of economic logic throughout social analysis.

SN: I spent half my life reading and re-reading *Distinction* particularly (Bourdieu 1984). If you look at my copy of that, the different coloured underlinings, the different things you get at different points from that – I think it's a wonderful, wonderful book. I suppose I did think about the practitioners within industries through that notion of cultural intermediaries and who they were sociologically, what their own projections onto humans are is very important. There's a moment in the J Walter Thompson archive at HAT [History of Advertising Trust], which Liz was alluding to, where you've got these urbane JWT staffers trying to deal with working class women and home perms – how they then have to enter this strange world to them. I found that fascinating. Between these rather Oxbridgey kind of gents and how – because of their own formation, their own taste – they had to negotiate their difficulty with working class women's haircare routines. That was a very dramatic moment where sociological differences were very, very important, I think, in shaping what they were doing.

LM: I don't really play much with Bourdieu. You can't use everything. My main use of Bourdieu was just an argument – and I'm sure it's not the legacy he meant to leave – about the historical basis of the New Cultural Intermediaries, the New Petit Bourgeoisie. It had such an influence on cultural studies that when I referred to Bourdieu at all, it tended to be to argue against that. More broadly, I don't have time to elaborate this, but there's an American pragmatist tradition which I found much more useful in terms of understanding the relationship between sentiment and technique. So, for me, I don't need to worry too much about the thick and the thin sense of what a human agent is. I think for me it is about another ancestor, Gabriel Tarde, and that post-Darwinian tradition: we all are what we are in terms of the relationships we have had and are having. We only acquire any kind of definition through relationships with other people and other things in the world. So I think that relieved me of the necessity of reading the Berber book!

PR: The other thing I felt during these conversations was this sense that – I heard, from Don, terms like 'visceral opposition' and Liz talked about not having the words, having responsibility and choice.

There is this sense of this being a project that *matters*. And it matters, not just in terms of hitting big journals and getting to do big speeches at conferences and so forth. I think that's something that I perceive as animating the tradition going forward and historically as well. Does that chime with the audience, with people's understanding of where we're at and what we're doing?

JSM: If I can borrow that as an excuse to ask a question, you're talking about the personal passions that animate a field of knowledge. I was really struck by how the panel, inadvertently or intentionally, gave us a sociology of knowledge, where you have those personal passions. But what I was curious about was the antecedents to those passions. So you want to react against that essentialism of economics. Stephen Mennell (2014) has a wonderful account of how economists 'forgot' culture because the *discipline* of economics changed: there used to be a whole lot more culture and history in training economists. So I want to know: was there economics in your training? Where did you get that visceral dislike? Was it a stereotypical: 'oh, economics is *that*'; 'economists are *like that*'? Or was it part of your training?

DS: I've got one very personal answer to that: my father was an economist! Not only that, he started out as an *academic* economist and ended up on Wall Street! So yes, it's deeply personal but we'd probably have to go psychoanalytic in order to get at the why!

LM: I just want to follow that by saying that my father was an insurance agent …

JSM: I definitely got more to my answer than I banked on!

SN: I did do economics in my first year of my sociology degree, which you used to do in those days. So I did get taught classical, neoclassical, Keynesian, Marxist economics. It was sort of half-important. I think it was – as Don was saying – the power of economics in the real world to dominate how markets were thought about, how consumers were thought about. The notion of 'the consumer', central to the consumer economy, that was so underdeveloped in economics.

DS: Everything that we call 'culture' was an externality to the economic. It's the irrational stuff. In Weberian terms, the substantive stuff outside the formal. Joking about fathers aside, probably the idea of 'visceral' came from a very basic sense of what is valid. What kind of arguments are you allowed to present? What aspects of life are you able to bring to the table? And economics, as one form of formal abstraction, has been crucial to negotiating what we are allowed to say. And we get a strong sense of this after twenty, thirty, whatever years of neoliberalism, about what is actually admissible into the public sphere and public discourse. A lot of that is regulated by economic discourse. So yeah, this is a passionate issue. This probably does come back to Bourdieu: we are dealing with a kind of symbolic violence that has been baked into the ways we are able to make sense of the world and act on it.

JE: There's obviously been massive developments and this was a seminal moment, we're still reaping the rewards of thinking about cultural economy in this way, within the academy. But given that you put the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4 and all we get are economists dominating the discourse, has this been a failed project? It's not had 'impact' – in that term that wasn't even used, however many years ago – it's failed to have impact beyond the academy. *We're* not called on to the *Today* programme, are we? I don't want to put too negative a spin on it, it has been massively *intellectually* exciting, but we've just seen an increase in abstraction of the economy, despite all the failures of neoliberalism, despite the 2008 crash, all those problems, we still only really hear from economists. Don't we?

LM: I think that's a really, really good question. I really like Phil Mirowski's intervention, in the *Performativity* collection with Nik-Khah (Mirowski and Nik-Khah 2007). I think it goes to the heart of this point exactly. That we can spend as much time as we like, in this narcissism of minor differences, where we talk only to ourselves. From my point of view, that really matters, in all sorts of ways. Not only because of the new dominance of behavioural economics: as if economists didn't have enough of the public sphere, didn't have enough of a policy ear, they have now absorbed enough sociology and psychology to tweak what was missing in their own account. I feel like sociology bears some responsibility for that. Partly because of what we do. I don't know if it's about treating economists with contempt but we certainly do need to do a bit better. I mean we are so much the smaller party in this that for me it's partly about articulating sociological projects more usefully and to be a bit less attached to this word 'critical'. We need also to be 'useful'. And I don't think sociology, over the last fifty years, has been terribly useful.

Note

1. Liz McFall would like it noted that she was a last minute substitute on this round table and sometimes speaks coherently.

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